NATHANAEL WEST'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE FACTORY: A Reappraisal of *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*

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CHAPTER V

WEST'S BOGUS: A WHOLE-IN-ONE

> Idiot, you just had a nightmare;
> things as crazy as a big machine
> room down in the bowels of a dam
> where people get cut up by robot
> workers don't exist, how can a man see them?
>
> Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962)

Balso Snell may be the arch-philistine American tourist that is unable to recognise any of the literary spoofs on his picaresque journey to the end of the night and the "end" of European art. A self-made "lyric poet", he can only express himself through the violent shrieks and body language derived from the ultimate medium of mass-produced pop culture, the comic strip.

In the 1930s, "mass culture, popular culture and kitsch all originally referred to much the same thing – cultural goods produced as commodities for mass consumption … according to formulae rather than arising from individual inspiration. They exploited rather than satisfied the needs of their audience". 124 Both Balso and Janey are mindless consumers of this kitschified culture, victims of a mass-produced society as recorded by West.

Balso's more elaborate seduction speeches read like a second-hand American version of Flaubert's satirical *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, containing only hollow, well-worn phrases and ideas. 125 In a sense, Janey Davenport would make him a perfect infantile playmate, for she is a ventriloquist's dummy, parroting the clichés of romantic pulp fiction.

But the artists that are only capable of producing artifacts to be defecated from the Trojan horse's bowels, the *Anus Mirabilis*, are

equally ludicrous. All they can manage is one loud, collective work of "F-art", which stands for false, failed and fake art.

These would-be artists range from the megalomaniac actor-emperor Nero to a pretentious Jewish art connoisseur (the tour guide), from a poet looking for

sensational subject matter (Keats) to a deranged Catholic martyr *cum* biographer (Mr Maloney) and from a sexually frustrated teenage author (John Gilson) to an obnoxious schoolteacher and biographer hungry for literary fame (Miss McGeeney). All are "writers in search of an audience" but deserve only a jeering, hooting and booing crowd.

The elaborate, over-ripe, decadent style of Proust and Huysmans, and the feverish three hundred pages of Dostoyevsky "to motivate one little murder" are literally brought down to size in a collage of "tales that are elephantine close-ups of various literary positions and their technical methods ... that make Kurt Schwitters' definition ["Anything that the artist expectorates is art", the original motto prefixed to *Balso Snell*] seem like an understatement", as West identified his own work in an advertisement published in 1931. [126]

If John Gilson's dictum "Sanity is the absence of all extremes" (p. 15) is anything to go by, then surely *Balso Snell* is an "insane" piece of fiction, for it is extreme in every way. This continuous sense of exaggeration – literature as a cartoon series to be continued *ad infinitum* – makes for much of the relentless drive and narrative pace in West's first book. Simultaneously, having been inundated by the avalanche of literary allusions and references to "pop art" (rather like the audience "covered with tons of loose excrement" in Gilson's art theatre, p. 31), one might prefer *not* to gather in the customary charming groups and discuss" this novel.

For this is indeed a novel to end all novels, bringing up the rear of the European picaresque genre that was appropriately initiated by Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. [127] Other books seem redundant, because a substantial amount of world literature has been incorporated into *Balso Snell*, digested via parody, burlesque, pastiche and allusion in the bowels of the Trojan horse. The great American novel is dished up as junk food or a TV dinner, especially designed for American consumers, a "hasty race" as West pigeon-holed them. [128] So this might be the end of the show, the novel has crumbled under its own weight, time to ring the curtain down. However, there are several reasons why *Balso Snell* itself is not to be confused with the horse manure as defecated by the inhabitants of the Trojan horse or with the "B.S." flowing from trendy 'arty-farty" theatres.

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Firstly, it is not a house of fiction (to use Henry James' phrase) made of any old bric-a-brac and loose excrement of European art and American pop art serving as mortar. Save the odd private joke, irrelevant joke, West has managed to build a grotesque funhouse, in which every kaleidoscopic mirror reflects and illuminates the thematic concerns, to reveal the fakery and would-be artistry of the lovers that remain unloved inside the wooden horse. Nothing comes straight from "the horse's mouth", neither the fourth-hand stories nor the hackneyed lovey-dovey phrases.

Of course, the point of (real and fictional) funhouses is to get lost. Familiar frames of reference are deliberately shattered or *defamiliarised*. Optional tricks continually trip up the bewildered visitor. What looks like a way out turns out to be an entrance to yet another maze of mirrors. One's Grecian nose is grotesquely deformed in a distorting mirror. One's slender-waisted companion is transformed into a steatopygous monster.

To depict West's nightmare factory as a funhouse suggests that the reader/visitor might as well enter the text *in medias res*, read towards the final episode and finish off by starting at the beginning. To be sure, this anti-novel, "written as a protest against writing books", consciously shows no linear development in the traditional way of Realism. Few "dream lives" do. This formal departure from tradition is reinforced by the absence of well-rounded, heroic characters. To invite the cartoonesque schlemiels round for tea and crumpets would not be lightly undertaken.

So West's novel of negation, his piece of anti-fiction, may be identified through drawing up a list of absentees. But this is not to say that it is a mere collage of pop art clippings and world literature glued together at random. It is not a forerunner of Brion Gysin's "cut-up and fold-in technique", although that may be a tempting first impression Then what *does* serve as mortar, holding the bric-a-brac mentioned above together?

Balso Snell is a "professional book" (in the sense of a well-constructed, coherent work), because the episodic narrative consists of a series of subtly linked "panels" modeled on the comic strip. To put it simply, the episodes are linked through points of similarity and contrast, often only apparent on closer examination. Ironically enough, these are the traditional tools of Jane Austen's trade, revealing the reverse side of frantically inventive Modernism.

There are several strands running through Balso's miscellaneous meetings. As befits a comic novel, these appear under the appropriate

guise of running gags. In order not to miss out on any of these, the reader should adjust his usual left-to-right linear habits and hop, step and jump back and forth. West actually retained some of {this] comic strip technique [in his second novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*]: each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture", as the author himself put his new mode of writing on the map in 1933. 129

What might be called the psychoanalytical strain features allusions to the works of Freud, Sade and Dostoyevsky. Thus, Balso, Mr Maloney, John and Saniette, and Miss McGeeney are joined together. All artists are portrayed as psychiatric patients in for a session on Freud's couch, in keeping with the Freudian view of "art as negative expression of neurosis or sexual perversion".

Both John and Beagle (who never meet) wear various literary masks that obscure their true selves, making it impossible for them to cope with reality. By contrast, Balso, Janey, and (partly) Mary share a mode of expression derived from the banal world of pop culture peppered with would-be erudite allusions.

Their basic philistinism is further contrasted with the world of the Classics. Homer's Troy story is burlesqued to insert the sole "A to B" development in *Balso Snell*. In the first episode, mock-epic hero Balso invades the Trojan horse by entering the "Anus Mirabilis"; in the final pages, he is invaded himself by a marching army (symbolizing his orgasm), dying a decidedly unheroic "little death" in his bed.

Similarly, Miss McGeeney is no "Helen with the face that launched a thousand ships". In aptly nightmarish transformations (heavily winking at Joyce and Chaucer) she is a bathing-beauty turned into a dry schoolmarm, turned back into a sex-crazed version of Barbara Cartland. A final classical allusion includes Euripides in Beagle Darwin's jeremiad featuring Greek gods versus helpless mortals.

Balso' s "highrowbeating about the bush" to seduce Janey and Mary – art travestied to win the heart (or body) of women – is matched by John's substitution of his art and brains for physical charms, to lure his teacher McGeeney on to his teenage bed.

This is picked up elsewhere by the bird imagery of Mr and Mrs Amblyornis Inornata versus Mrs Bird of Paradise (pp. 26-7).

Mr Snells' preference for grotesque cripples and dislike of "perfect" circles are complemented by the image of "widening ripples" in Gilson's pamphlet. West's penchant for verbal play forces us to consider the cripples-ripples pun. The wholeness of Realism and Monism is symbolized by a single circle or 'splash" caused by a stone dropped into a pond. West manages to get blood out of this stone by telling the story of the ever-widening ripples, by employing a pluralistic style. Each style reveals a different character or attitude. Thus, his

fiction consists of variations on several themes, rather than an organically developed sonata.

The perfection of circles (and the pretentiousness of Realism and Monism) are further ridiculed by the many “Oh’s” that are either lewd or naïve and through allusions to the circularity of the anus and testicles. Moreover, the Narcissism prevalent in Balso, Mr Maloney and John is symbolized by their navel-staring, another detestable and immature “circular” tendency.

The Proustian image of smell triggering off artistic creation is developed in John Raskolnikov Gilson’s “Crime Journal” and in McGeeney’s biography of Sam Perkins, through references to hyper-sensitive “dandies” in Poe and Huysmans.

Employing a form that foreshadows the post-modernist exploits of John Barth *cum suis*, West has created a *perpetuum mobile* that writes itself and about itself. This is represented by the “Phoenix Excrementi” (p. 5).

The resulting self-obsessed, Narcissistic atmosphere points towards the implied homosexual character of the 19th century ‘dandy” and 20th century “camp” fiction. Characteristically, West keeps pulling the rug from under the Freudian critics’ feet, for all puns concerning anally-orientated matter and Narcissism are “gay” in both senses of the word.

Holding *Balso Snell* at arm’s length, the hackneyed pop culture of Balso, Janey, and the more ambitious McGeeney clashes with the Classical, European high-brow culture of Beagle and John,. This yields the basic comic recipe for this short novel. The mixed pies containing pop and high-brow art are thrown at the reader at breakneck speed. As in slapstick movies, the victim feels bewildered initially, but as soon as everybody joins in the fun the appeal is irresistible.

Thus, in a precocious *tour de force*, West accomplished a very American ideal: to take apart the European castles of culture – the ivory towers of decadence and ennui long deserted by literary dandies Poe and Huysmans – and rebuild them in America, re-laying the foundations for the post-modernist, inward-looking genre of literary parody. 130

For West, through John Gilson and Beagle Darwin, is acutely aware of the literary indigestion from which reader, writer and character - three men in the same boat – suffer. “I even resisted the desire to look up certain books in the library” (p. 20), John Gilson admits before committing a crime a la Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov. The joke is clearly on the reader here, who *cannot* resist this temptation, to frantically read up on practically everything under the sun in order to keep up with West’s staccato literary drum solo.

Both John and Beagle are emotionally crippled because their response to the facts of life (Birth, Love and Death) is stifled by their literary "colouring"; literature has dyed their brains in such bright shades that the heart is eclipsed. Both are aware of this predicament, but are trapped inside their own literary universe, in roles and behind masks of personae appearing in the Classics, Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky. There is no way out, their lives are lived, not in Thoreau's "quiet desperation", but in hysterical despair.

Mary McGeeney's case is possibly even more tear-provoking, for she wobbles between the world of literary pretense and the purple fairy-tale world of romantic fiction, unaware of either. Similar to John Gilson's *camping* in front of sailor's (p.22), Mary's pornographic poems and her "Arabian Nights" swooning and crooning can only be interpreted as silly nonsense or as high Camp. It may be useful to apply Susan Sontag's distinction between "completely naïve and wholly conscious Camp" to respectively Balso, Janey and Mary – who do not realize the banality behind their ballyhoo – and John and Beagle, who are acutely aware of the showy theatricality of their literary acts. [131]

Portraying the characters populating the bowels of the Trojan horse as absolute failures in Love and fakes in Art, *Balso Snell* firmly belongs to the Swiftian tradition of satire. According to John Hawkes, this form "demolishes man's image of himself as a rational creature". [132] This demolition is reinforced by the nightmarish Sadeian and Freudian imagery in *Balso Snell*. The mind is completely choked by the Freudian Id, in the shape of a derby hat. West actually comes close to Sade's nihilism in his view of sexual relationships. The only two women who seem to "enjoy" the aberration of Balso and John (Mary and Saniette) are victims of rape and sadism.

The dualism between the sensual joys of Dionysus and the cerebral asceticism of Apollo is not resolved, for both are violently repudiated. Physical pleasure is invariably linked with pain, perversion, ugliness and obscenity. Its romanticized form is derived from mass-produced pulp fiction, and amounts to mere silliness. The products of Apollonian creativity are all fakes, fourth-hand versions of the grandeur and glory of European art. Every literary attitude towards life comes out as "horse manure", worth no more than what Balso Snell's initials stand for.

It has been argued that "when so many allusions occur, many are bound to be unfamiliar to the average and even the well-read reader" and that the many "obscure … esoteric allusions [in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*] are more functional, embedded in social, political, or psychological context, and not merely accumulative". [133]

But West's allusions are well-chosen; they are no mere college whiz-kid's display of learning. They illustrate the thematic content

mentioned above in a highly ingenious fashion. Moreover, the sophisticated wit behind the references to, for example, Poe, Huysmans, Proust and Joyce indicates that *Balso Snell* is not the work of a smutty schoolboy spraying his graffiti all over the walls of American fiction.

Admittedly, West's literary game of "whodunit" is not easy to play. But his allusions are not impossible to trace, as has been shown. They are not to be treasured solely as literary trouvailles, although that is certainly part of West's game, but as

substantial contributions to this short text's momentum, tone, and meaning. One does have to be prepared to read up on world literature and the popular arts, but then *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land* and even the humorous pieces by S.J. Perelman require a considerable amount of background knowledge to be understood as well.

Underneath the delightful surface of exuberant wit, inventive use of literary pastiche and comic strip lingo there lurks a profound disgust concerning the human condition and the "state of the arts". This is triggered off by thwarted high-minded ideals, a Swiftian sense of loss based on the realisation that people fail to reach their potential greatness.

West's flirtatious affair with the "vicious, mean, ugly, obscene and insane" quoted before is more than mere coquettishness, an American answer to the French *surrealiste* goal of shocking the bourgeoisie. For the scatological conceit in *Balso Snell* is used to express despair and contempt concerning the state literature had got herself into. A "fresh and original" work of art can only be a rehash of European dishes as digested in the bowels of Homer's horse.

The pretentious poses employed by the losers unfit to survive the rat-race, the rejects of life and art, are shown up in highly innovative ways in *Balso Snell*. The resulting insight in literature and life yields more of a traditional conclusion: people and things are not what they seem. To put it in the "jazzed-up comic strip lingo" of West's beloved *Krazy Kat*: 134

Golla, I always had a ida they was grend,
And megnifishint, and wondafil, and majestic …
But my goodniss!: It ain't so.

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ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER V

124. See King, “Modernism and Mass Culture”, in op.cit., p. 124.

125. See Gustave Flaubert, appendix to *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881).

126. See Nathanael West, “Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone”, in Martin, ed., op.cit., p. 30.

127. See Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950). West had “dipped into … such classics as Pretonius, Suetonius, and Apuleius. See Martin, op. cit., p. 69.

128. See West, “Some Notes on Miss L.” (1933), in Martin, ed., op.cit. p. 66.

129. Ibidem, p. 66.

130. See Harry Levin, “Castles and Culture”, the appendix to his *The Power of Blackness* (1958; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), pp. 239-48 for a general discussion of this phenomenon. Poe’s castles are all situated in England, France and Germany.

131. See Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964); rpt. in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (1982; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 110. The essay consists of 58 notes (pp. 105-19), dedicated to Oscar Wilde.

Sontag calls Camp “Dandyism in the age of mass culture” on p. 116. West must be the first American author to have used this slang word, recorded in the *SOED* as early as 1909, but in *Partridge’s Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (8th ed., 1984), p. 176, it is spotted since the late 1930s”.

132. See John Hawkes, “Flannery O’Connor’s Devil”, in *Sewanee Review 70* (Summer 1962), p. 396.

133. See Comerchero, op.cit., p. 55 and Gee Hurkmans, *Nathanael West’s Wasteland* (unpubl. Master’s thesis, *Engels Seminarium* Library, University of Amsterdam 1983), p. 3.

134. Quoted in Patrick McDonnell et al, *Krazy Kat* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), p. 19.

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